

AL-A`RAF

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The word al-a`raf is plural of ‘arf or ‘urf, which means height, top tower or a peak. Surah Al-A`raf (Seventh Surah of the Holy Qur’an) in the verses, where it relates the life in paradise and life in the hell, reveals that there will be a wall or veil between the hell and the heaven for the demarcation of their circumferences. The top of this wall is called al a`raf which means the heights; the prominent & distinguished places. These heights are inhabited by some people having the facility to observe the companions in paradise and those who are in the hell. The Holy Qur’an says:

“Between them shall be a veil, and on the heights (al-a`raf) will be men who would know every one by his marks. They will call out to the companions of the Garden, “peace on you”. When their eyes shall be turned towards the companions of the Fire, they will say, “Our Lord! Send us not to the company of the wrong doers”. The men on heights (ashab al-a`raf) will call to certain men whom hey will know from their marks saying, “Of what profit to you, were your hoard and your arrogant ways?”¹

Now, the question does arise; what is *A`raf*? Who are the people called Ashab al-A`raf? What is their next home (if any)? The interpretations of the Holy Qur’an are replete with differences, because the word a`raf has different connotations. One school thinks that the men on the heights are the angels, or such men of exalted spiritual dignity (e.g. the great apostles) as will be able to know the souls at sight as regards their spiritual worth: The heights will be exalted stations from which they will welcome the righteous with a salutation of peace, even before the righteous have entered heaven; the salvation to those whom they solute.

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Another school of thought thinks that the men on the heights are such souls as are not decidedly on the side of merit or decidedly on the side of sin, but evenly balanced on a partition between Heaven and Hell. Their case is yet to be decided, but their salutation to the righteous is a wistful salutation, because they hope for God's Mercy. The third line of interpretation is close to the first one, with this exception that the partition and heights are figurative. The higher souls will rejoice at the approaching salvation of the righteous.²

Let us deal with the three questions, one by one respectively. First question is: What is a *'raf*?

Etymologically a *'raf* is plural of *'arf* meaning height and top. It is used for everything exalted. According to the interpretation of Raghib Isfahani and Jubran Mas'ood, it is referred to the wall between the Hell and Heaven.³ Ibn Manzoor maintains that a *'raf* is plural of *'urf* meaning top and elevated surface, especially top of the wall between the Garden and the Fire.⁴ Urdu Encyclopedia of Islam quotes Richard Bell, pronouncing a *'raf* as *i'raf* meaning (the people able) to recognize. He translates the verse as:

“Some people are to identify (as supervisors or guards) and they identify”.⁵

Ashraf Ali Thanwi opines that there would be an interception (wall), the top of which is a *'raf* from where the paradise and the hell are seen clearly.⁶

Abu al-Kalam Azad writes:

“If two places are adjoining, and to be segregated, a wall is built between them, so is the demarcation between heaven and hell. If one step is forward it is paradise, and if one step is lost it is hell”.⁷

Ameen Ahsan Islahi interprets:

“A *'raf* is a plural of *'arf* meaning the upper part of forehead of a horse or a cockscomb. That is why this word is used for tower, turret, and a seeing-sight, built on a high wall or on the top of a hill”.⁸

Mufti Muhammad Shafi has comprehensively explained a'raf, going in details of meaning of this word and their implications or connotations. Muhammad Idris Kandhalwi also agrees with him in this connection;⁹ the essence of their arguments is that in these ayat, a fortification is mentioned which would exist between dwellers of paradise and dwellers of hell. This is also mentioned in Sura Al-Hadid as Sur. The word Sur is used for the wide city-wall, which has been built on solid and established ground, and has entrenchments to defend the city remaining aware of the invaders. The top of this fortification is named as a'raf; because it is plural of 'arf' which means prominent and distinguished or an elevated surface.

Imam Razi, further interprets the word Hijab that, the word hijab (veil) means something obstructing the mixing of two. It also means interception, prohibiting entrance into something. It figuratively means the veil serving as demarcation of circumferences of paradise and hell, but here it stands, literally for a wall prohibiting two communities to mingle with each other. It may be a glass permitting eyes to have a glance at the on-going scenario, and also a wall prohibiting mixing. The top of this wall is called a'raf.¹⁰

It is clear from this discussion that a'raf means the top of the wall between the paradise and the hell, which clearly demarcate the division between them. This wall is transparent enough to make the communication possible for each side.

The second question is: Who are Ashab al- A'raf? To whom a'raf is going to be allotted on the Day of Judgment. The Holy Qur'an declares that they are rijal (men) having the ability to recognize dwellers of the hell and those of the heaven by their marks.

Ibn Kathir¹¹ has discussed in detail the men on a'raf. According to him the different opinions if the different interpreters are converged to one point, which is the stance that the men having equal repository of good and bad deeds, would be awarded the status of a'raf. When asked about the persons having evenly balanced sheet of their virtues

and vices, the Holy Prophet (PBUH) answered that they would be settled on a'raf. They would not be allowed to enter paradise, however, have some assurance.

Keeping in view, the traditions mentioned by Ibn Jarir Tabari, regarding ashab al-a'raf, we come to know that they are the people having balanced quantity of virtues and vices. They have neither so many good deeds to be awarded paradise, nor do they have so many evils that they may have been moved towards the Fire.

Ashraf Ali Thanwi, Syed Qutab Shaheed and Syed Abu al-A'la Maududi,¹² are of the same view. Al-Qurtabi¹³ has referred to as many as ten traditions regarding their different categories of men on a'raf, derived from the holy words of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). These include, the people having equal quantity of good and bad deed, the pious scholars, the martyrs, the martyrs who have fought without the consent of their parents, the messengers of God, the angels and the illegitimate off-spring of human being.

Amen Ahsan Islahi¹⁴ has raised some objections about these categories. According to him the word rijal means important personalities. He opines that only the Muslim scholars, who are struggling for the projection of virtue and goodness, deserve the elevated and exalted status of a'raf.

It means that the answer to the third question is unanimously propounded that ashab al a'raf are to be awarded paradise later. Because the Holy Qur'an assures that though they have not entered paradise, "They will have an assurance (thereof)". Again their salutation to the paradise owners is a sign that they will join them in the long run. They would be provided with the facility to observe paradise and hell, greeting the paradise winners and criticizing the hell choosers. After the decision of all the mankind they will be ordered to enter the Garden.

Conclusion: Keeping in view the precious opinion of Fakhr al Razi,¹⁵ we come to the conclusion that there are two versions about a'raf; firstly there are heights between paradise and hell, inhabited by some distinguished persons, secondly, there is an exalted stage from which the recognition of the paradise winners and hell choosers will be managed by one, who will have equal storage of virtues and vices.

Ashab al-a'raf will be those who belong to the high rank of the dignified persons, may be messengers of God, the angels, the martyrs and the Muslim scholars. In addition to them there are the people belonging to the second rank of dignified persons, having equal account of virtue and vice. Both the groups of ashbab al-a'raf would be granted paradise according to their respective ranks. The Omniscient Allah knows better.

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